

JANUARY 2016

GENTRIFICATION

**ANWAR
ODURO-KWARTENG**



DEBATING MATTERS
**TOPIC
GUIDES**

MOTION:

**“GENTRIFICATION
IS GOOD FOR
NEIGHBOURHOODS”**

ABOUT DEBATING MATTERS

Debating Matters because ideas matter. This is the premise of the Institute of Ideas Debating Matters Competition for sixth form students which emphasises substance, not just style, and the importance of taking ideas seriously. Debating Matters presents schools with an innovative and engaging approach to debating, where the real-world debates and a challenging format, including panel judges who engage with the students, appeal to students from a wide range of backgrounds, including schools with a long tradition of debating and those with none.

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KEY TERMS

[Gentrification](#)

[Urban Renewal](#)

INTRODUCTION

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‘Gentrification’ has recently become part of the vernacular when discussing issues around housing, social mobility and inequality. Normally used as a pejorative term, it describes the phenomenon of wealthier residents in cities gradually moving into traditionally run down areas and changing the dynamics of a community. Earlier this year the debate in London came to a head with protests against gentrification held in Brixton, south London in which residents aimed to highlight the damaging impact that it was having on their community, both for traders priced out of retail units and residents who can no longer afford the increase in rents [Ref: [BBC News](#)]. Supporters of gentrification on the other hand suggest that ultimately, it “helps the poor” [Ref: [Economist](#)], and is a positive thing which brings jobs, commerce and culture to run down or deprived areas, acting as a source of regeneration for communities. However, for critics, “regeneration is simply code for gentrification, which is often a fancy term to describe how poor people are cleared from valuable land to make way for the rich” [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. The discussion isn’t only pertinent to the UK - throughout America, in cities such as Chicago, Portland, and San Francisco, as well as New York Boroughs such as Brooklyn and Manhattan – the debate about whether gentrification is a positive or negative force is hotly contested. Fundamental to the discussion are questions surrounding the nature of cities – should we be relaxed about the fact that they are dynamic, fluid places in which different types of people move in and out of areas over a period of time? Or does fluidity create problems for settled communities who may feel forced and priced out of neighbourhoods when newer, wealthier residents arrive? Is gentrification a benign form of urban renewal that we should welcome, or is it really a symptom of inequality? Is gentrification a good thing?



THE GENTRIFICATION DEBATE IN CONTEXT

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What is gentrification?

Although the definition is contested, the term gentrification was first used in 1964 by sociologist Ruth Glass in her study of working class displacement in London. She says: “One by one, many of the working class quarters of London have been invaded by the middle classes – upper and lower....once this process of ‘gentrification’ starts in a district, it goes on rapidly until most or all of the original working class occupiers are displaced, and the whole social character of the district is changed.” [Ref: [UCL](#)] The Collins Dictionary describes it as: “A process in which middle class people take up residence in a typically working class area of a city, changing the character of the area.” [Ref: [Collins Dictionary](#)] It is mainly used in discussions around regeneration, urban renewal, class and housing, and is at the heart of the debate about the changing nature of towns and cities.

Gentrification as urban renewal

Many see gentrification as a cyclical process of renewal which is the very essence of a dynamic city [Ref: [Evening Standard](#)]. For cultural critic Stephen Bayley, “the arguments for gentrification are strong. It is a process which enhances derelict properties, creating wealth.” [Ref: [Spectator](#)] He dismisses critics as advocating a backward, negative attitude towards cities, asserting that to ignore the merits of gentrification is “to accept the inevitability of decline”, concluding that: “Gentrification is about returning cities from the dead. So it’s a vital obligation.” [Ref: [Spectator](#)] Commenting on the effects of gentrification in inner city American neighbourhoods, writer Justin Davidson notes that: “Gentrification doesn’t have to be something that

one group inflicts on another; often, it’s the result of aspirations that everybody shares....a nice neighbourhood should not be a luxury, but an urban right.” [Ref: [New York Magazine](#)] In addition, it is argued in some quarters that gentrification helps reinvigorate previously impoverished areas, because “repopulating the inner cities has been good for all, creating sustainably dense neighbourhoods...rebuilding derelict sites and introducing articulate new residents, who then press for improved schools and services for all locals – rich or poor, in a kind of trickle down of aspiration.” [Ref: [Guardian](#)] An example of this potential for rebirth can be seen in areas of central Manchester such as Ancoats, which has been completely transformed from a crime ridden pocket of deprivation and poverty, to a desirable, economically thriving hub of creativity and commerce in little under a decade [Ref: [Guardian](#)].

A threat to communities?

Debate has raged about the way in which gentrification threatens to fundamentally alter communities in places such as Brick Lane, London [Ref: [BBC News](#)], Brooklyn, New York [Ref: [Huffington Post](#)], and Tenderloin in San Francisco [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Last year film director Spike Lee made headlines when he launched a scathing attack on gentrification in his old Brooklyn neighbourhood, questioning whether the effects had been positive for long standing residents [Ref: [New York Magazine](#)]. His reservations are not new - critics of gentrification claim that ultimately, it is a form of ‘social cleansing’, which according to one activist, “means cleaning an area up, and saying if you can’t afford to be here, then you have to leave.” [Ref: [Telegraph](#)] In London condemnation is often reserved for local councils,



THE GENTRIFICATION DEBATE IN CONTEXT CONTINUED...

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who are accused by critics of selling desirable land with social housing stock to private companies, who wish to redevelop the area for profit, and price out long standing, poorer residents - thus radically altering the demographics of a community [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. The consequence of this, according to one commentator, is that: "As gentrification tightens its grip, people on lower incomes are being pushed to the area's edges" [Ref: [New Statesman](#)], leading to segregation and social displacement. Architect Edwin Heathcote cautions against the displacing effects of gentrification, stating that a social mix is vital in creating adaptable, vibrant cities where rich and poor are able to live side by side [Ref: [Financial Times](#)].

Who wins and who loses?

Opponents of gentrification claim that it largely bypasses the poor, and only benefits the newer, wealthier residents of an up and coming area. Using the American city of Detroit as an example, academic Brian Doucet argues that gentrification, "does little to address poverty, unemployment, and access to resources for the vast majority of residents...contributing to greater inequality and polarisation." [Ref: [Guardian](#)] Others though assert that gentrification is not as simple as its critics would like to suggest – with the poor being left behind by the affluent, who move into their areas and reap all of the benefits of an improving neighbourhood. Instead, as one advocate points out, the regeneration of high streets and markets in run down areas encourages people to spend money locally, therefore putting money back into the community, which is "positive for neighbourhoods and all those living in them". After all: "The sober truth about gentrification is that, for everyone who loses

out, someone gains. And that 'someone' is not always one of the rich." [Ref: [Guardian](#)] With all of this in mind, how then should we view gentrification? Is it a positive indicator of regeneration and urban renewal, bringing investment into deprived areas? Or is it a form of 'social cleansing', slowly pushing the poor further and further towards the edge of our cities, while doing little to alleviate inequality and poverty?



ESSENTIAL READING

FOR

[The moral case for gentrification](#)

Stephen Bayley *Spectator* 27 June 2015

[Bring on the hipsters: gentrification is good for the poor](#)

Economist 21 February 2015

[Gentrification is natural evolution](#)

Philip Ball *Guardian* 19 November 2014

[Is gentrification all bad?](#)

Justin Davidson *New York Magazine* 2 February 2014

AGAINST

[The gentrification and petrification of London's heart](#)

Edwin Heathcote *Financial Times* 16 June 2015

[White hipsters, not black looters are now threatening post riots London](#)

Pauline Pierce *Telegraph* 6 August 2014

[The Truth about Gentrification: regeneration or con trick?](#)

Aditya Chakraborty & Sophie Robinson-Tillett *Guardian* 18 May 2014

[Why this 'Shoreditchification' of London must stop](#)

Alex Proud *Telegraph* 13 January 2014

IN DEPTH

[The G Word: gentrification and its many meanings](#)

Gillian B. White *Atlantic* 25 May 2015

[Gentrification and its discontents](#)

Benjamin Schwarz *Atlantic* June 2010

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BACKGROUNDEERS

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[San Francisco's gritty Tenderloin district pushes back against tech-led gentrification](#)

Rory Carroll *Guardian* 20 July 2015

['Black Beverley Hills' debates historic status vs white gentrification](#)

Angel Jennings *L.A Times* 13 July 2015

[The anti-gentrification campaign in Camden is 40 years too late](#)

Dave Hill *Guardian* 13 June 2015

[Eccentricity is the vital ingredient to a successful city](#)

Edwin Heathcote *Financial Times* 26 May 2015

[Gentrification spreads upheaval in San Francisco's Mission District](#)

Carol Pogash *New York Times* 22 May 2015

[Stop gentrification: the urban wheel is always turning](#)

Simon Jenkins *Evening Standard* 28 April 2015

[Gentrification in Brixton: who wins, who loses, and who's to blame](#)

Megan Meaker *New Statesman* 26 April 2015

[Gentrification](#)

Flavia Krause-Jackson *Bloomberg* 23 March 2015

[Gentrified Brooklyn is not my Brooklyn](#)

Vanessa Martir *Huffington Post* 16 March 2015

[Detroit's gentrification won't give poor citizens reliable public services](#)

Brian Doucet *Guardian* 17 February 2015

[In gentrified Brooklyn, where will ordinary people live?](#)

Alan Singer *Huffington Post* 13 February 2015

[This charming Manchester: is Morrissey's city still recognisable?](#)

Alec Herron *Guardian* 4 February 2015

[The myth of gentrification](#)

John Buntin *Slate* 14 January 2015

[How Ruth Glass changed the way we approach our cities](#)

University College London Urban Lab 13 January 2015

[This urban vibrancy is really just urban cleansing](#)

Ian Martin *Guardian* 19 January 2014

[In defence of the 'shoreditchification' of London](#)

Aleks Eror *Telegraph* 14 January 2014



IN THE NEWS

[Raging class war: anti-gentrification protests in Camden, London, ends in violence](#)

Russia Today 12 July 2015

[Berlin becomes the first German City to make rent cap a reality](#)

Guardian 1 June 2015

[Brick Lane: gentrification risk to Spitalfields Bangladeshi community](#)

BBC News 24 May 2015

[London markets under threat from gentrification](#)

Guardian 19 May 2015

[Battle for Brixton: retailers and residents fight back as gentrification pushes poorer families out](#)

Independent 1 May 2015

[Police use CS spray on Brixton gentrification protestors](#)

BBC News 25 April 2015

[Gentrification: what is it, and why are people fighting it?](#)

Channel 4 News 24 April 2015

[‘It has slowly eroded the place away’: your stories of gentrification – from London to L.A](#)

Guardian 24 March 2015

[Aylesbury Estate eviction see protesters battle police](#)

BBC News 19 February 2015

[Residents protest against gentrification in Clapham](#)

BBC News 5 March 2014

[Spike Lee’s amazing rant against gentrification](#)

New York Magazine 25 February 2014

[The slow decline of American Chinatowns](#)

BBC News 4 February 2014

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AUDIO/VISUAL

[MORAL MAZE: The morality of social inclusion](#)

BBC Radio 4 14 March 2014

[MORAL MAZE: The morality of place](#)

BBC Radio 4 20 July 2013



ADVICE FOR DEBATING MATTERS



FOR STUDENTS

READ EVERYTHING

In the Topic Guide and in the news - not just your side of the argument either.

STATISTICS ARE GOOD BUT.....

Your opponents will have their own too. They'll support your points but they aren't a substitute for them.

BE BOLD

Get straight to the point but don't rush into things: make sure you aren't falling back on earlier assertions because interpreting a debate too narrowly might show a lack of understanding or confidence.

DON'T BACK DOWN

Try to take your case to its logical conclusion before trying to seem 'balanced' - your ability to challenge fundamental principles will be rewarded - even if you personally disagree with your arguments.

DON'T PANIC

Never assume you've lost because every question is an opportunity to explain what you know. Don't try to answer every question but don't avoid the tough ones either.

FOR TEACHERS

Hoping to start a debating club? Looking for ways to give your debaters more experience? Debating Matters have a wide range of resources to help develop a culture of debate in your school and many more Topic Guides like this one to bring out the best in your students. For these and details of how to enter a team for the Debating Matters Competition visit our website, www.debatingmatters.com

FOR JUDGES

Judges are asked to consider whether students have been brave enough to address the difficult questions asked of them. Clever semantics might demonstrate an acrobatic mind but are also likely to hinder a serious discussion by changing the terms and parameters of the debate itself.

Whilst a team might demonstrate considerable knowledge and familiarity with the topic, evading difficult issues and failing to address the main substance of the debate misses the point of the competition. Judges are therefore encouraged to consider how far students have gone in defending their side of the motion, to what extent students have taken up the more challenging parts of the debate and how far the teams were able to respond to and challenge their opponents.

As one judge remarked *'These are not debates won simply by the rather technical rules of schools competitive debating. The challenge is to dig in to the real issues.'* This assessment seems to grasp the point and is worth bearing in mind when sitting on a judging panel.



**“A COMPLEX
WORLD REQUIRES
THE CAPACITY
TO MARSHALL
CHALLENGING IDEAS
AND ARGUMENTS”**

**LORD BOATENG, FORMER BRITISH HIGH
COMMISSIONER TO SOUTH AFRICA**